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New east-west freeway in valley?

By Nicole Warburton Deseret Morning News

Toll roads aren't the only traffic issue that could literally hit Salt Lake County residents at home.

A new transportation issue that could displace more houses, businesses and lives than the proposed Mountain View Corridor is emerging in Salt Lake County -- how to improve east-west traffic.

Most of the county's major east-west roads, such as 3500 South and 13400 South, are at gridlock during peak commute times, and congestion is only expected to get worse, according to the Utah Department of Transportation. The agency says that major fixes will be needed in the future to relieve traffic, including the possibility of a new east-west freeway.

"Most of the east-west roads are at capacity or are exceeding capacity," said Randy Park, director over UDOT Region 2, which covers Salt Lake, Summit and Tooele counties. "There will have to be major improvements."

A new freeway could displace up to 1,500 homes and businesses, according to a planning study by the Wasatch Front Regional Council. Because of impacts, the Regional Council said it doesn't consider a new freeway a very viable option. But at least one state lawmaker is willing to let UDOT study the idea.

During the upcoming legislative session, which begins Jan. 15, Rep. Ron Bigelow, R-West Valley, plans to offer a bill that would give UDOT money to study possible fixes and improvements to east-west roads in Salt Lake County. The bill, which is still being drafted, would require UDOT to study roads from 2100 South to the Utah County line.

The possibilities that will be studied could include a new freeway and general widening and intersection improvements, Bigelow said. He hasn't determined how much money UDOT would receive to do the study.

"Clearly, given growth patterns, we had sure better take a look at it and better do it seriously," Bigelow said. "Right now, we have problems with east-west traffic. If you increase the number of people, it's going to get worse, even with mass transit."

Park said Thursday that he has yet to see details of Bigelow's bill but that the agency would be willing to work with him to study east-west traffic in the county. No major studies that look at traffic in the whole region have been done yet, but improvements have been made to some east-west roads such as 12300 South and 9000 South.

Park doesn't know exactly why a major study has yet to be done but says that east-west traffic is the top transportation issue in Salt Lake County. North-south traffic is already helped by roads such as the Bangerter Highway, State Street, Redwood Road, Interstate 15 and the proposed Mountain View Corridor.

The major roads that go east-west are already running at capacity, Park said. UDOT is studying whether to add additional lanes to roads such as 5400 South. Intersection improvements are also planned, and the agency is studying whether some east-west state roads could be turned into one-way streets, which would allow more traffic to filter through an area.

Beyond those possibilities, "there will have to be major improvements," Park said.

He said he thinks that "energy" is building to start a major discussion about east-west traffic in Salt Lake County but that residents and lawmakers will have to weigh whether a new road and better traffic are worth the impacts to homes and businesses. Unlike the Mountain View Corridor, where some land has been reserved as a route for the highway, no land has been preserved for a new east- west route.

And homes and businesses abut most east-west traffic arteries in the valley. The question is, Park said, "are we at the point where quality of life will suffer because of limited east-west mobility?"

He added, "Would an east-west freeway be a good option? Yes. But one of the reasons we haven't looked at it is because of the impacts."

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